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INDIVIDUAL INSTRUCTION VERSUS CLASS TEACHING

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It would appear that enough has been said in recent years upon the broad and important subject of educational method. The time certainly is ripe for us to act and endeavor in our acting to carry out the advanced idea of the present day. In theory, much of what has been wrought out is absolutely true. But the difficulty arises when the searcher who reads well and extensively upon matters of method desires to put these ideas into practice. Perhaps the question that today needs our close attention is how to put into practice those theories that relate to individual instruction.

To make it plain that in discussing the individual method of teaching we are riding on the crest of the educational wave, I will quote from an article by Dr. Petzoldt of the Gymnasium in Spandau translated in a recent issue of the *Literary Digest*. The writer urges the establishment of special schools for those particularly gifted. He says in part:

It certainly is a fact beyond dispute that in one and the same class there are those who can do the work assigned in half the time which it takes the weaker members of the class to do it. Should they not have the opportunity to do so? Or rather, should not special attention be paid to those who promise to become the leaders in the world of thought and work, rather than to those who, in the nature of the case, can never get beyond the average in knowledge and abilities? Wisdom and not charity should be the controlling factors in the arrangement of the school curricula. Every teacher of experience knows that not a few of his brightest pupils have been seriously checked in their educational development by the fact that they were compelled to advance slowly in order that their weaker classmates might keep up with them. We believe that it will be conceded by all teachers acquainted with the condition of affairs in the secondary schools that the more gifted pupils could readily finish the nine years' course in six years, and in this way enter the universities at the age of fifteen instead of eighteen, as is now generally the case, and thus enter professional life fully three years earlier than they could under existing circumstances. True, this innovation would demand the appointment of some special teachers; but the results would

amply justify the additional cost. Let the State try the experiment of arranging special courses or schools for those who are gifted enough to do the work in less than the ordinary time.

This idea of classifying pupils according to their capability of advancement is not new, yet its constant recurrence shows conclusively that the line of educational thought today tends toward the consideration of the individuality of every child, rather than ministering to the needs of the average child, as did the older pedagogy. Nevertheless, this plan of separating pupils in schools or classes according to their intellectual strength is objectionable; for it stigmatizes the less gifted, and deprives them of the impetus resulting from contact with their brighter classmates. Can we not then devise a plan other than that of separation, whereby the pupil's promotion or progress will depend solely on his own ability, rather than on the concentrated effort of those around him?

This grouping of pupils into classes as we have them in our grammar and secondary schools has no basis but expediency. The large number of pupils and limited number of teachers require it. What is the result? When class instruction is used exclusively, the teacher gauges the advancement of the class by what the average child can do—the average child—how often he appears in theory, how seldom in real life! The same lesson is assigned every one—all are at the same page in the textbook at the same time—like work is required of each one. Does it follow that all react alike, even if they do receive the same instruction? Should they all be at the same page in the textbook? What of the bright pupil who could forge ahead? What of the less interested ones who cannot keep up with the rest? Think too of the bright pupil who has mastered the subject on your first presentation. How edifying for him to listen to your reiteration of it with a dull pupil! How many of us like to retrace our steps simply for the pleasure of the process, when we have exhausted all possibilities the first time? With this method of recitation the teacher can reach only a certain group of pupils at one time. If he direct his attention to the weaker ones, he is sacrificing the interests of the more alert. He really does most with the so-called average pupils, for they, not the gifted, set the pace for the class. It is obviously impossible for the individual child to develop unhampered

by the limitations of his fellows. All are leveled to the same intellectual stature.

But enough of the fallacy of class instruction. Now for the individual method—the panacea for all these ills.

The practical difficulty of individual instruction seems to loom up large in the question: “If you give your attention to one individual, what are you going to do with the rest?” But it resolves itself very simply into the following direction: Let your class every other day during the recitation-period devote themselves to silent written work, as has been the practice for a year in the academic and other classes of the McKinley High School.

It will be agreed, I am sure, that in every subject the child studies, he should be equally at ease in both oral and written expression, that he should be trained to equal mastery of either instrument; and that the same time should be given to both.

On the day that your pupils write, let us call it “laboratory” day, though some may object to that term—but I think it suffices—on that day, let each pupil have a certain amount of written work to do. It is not necessary, it is not even desirable, that every pupil be doing the same thing.

If the entire class up to this time has mastered sixty-nine pages in the textbook, why not let the bright pupil see what he alone can do with page 70—without your direction? That will be the very best way to review him on the previous sixty-nine pages, to see if he has developed thought-power or has only mastered facts. Has he got sufficient strength so that when he comes face to face with a new condition, he will master it—or let it master him? That is what will confront him in after life, and it is this very power of initiative that the unschooled mind so often has that gives it advantage over the trained mind. Having disposed of the bright pupil—you recollect he was at page 70—you can now give your attention to the one who rightly belongs at about page 35. Surely you recognize the economic value of this sort of instruction. The pupil who most needs your attention gets it without your sacrificing the interest of any of the others; for all are at work independently of one another.

Individual instruction, too, gives the expressional power as much attention as the thought-power. On the other hand, in class instruc-

tion when you address a question to all and call on one pupil to answer; each one should be going through a thought-process, but only one has the added advantage of expression. As a result we let the expressional power lie behind the thought power and then brand a pupil as stupid, when he is merely inarticulate.

Important as are these advantages of individual teaching, I think its final educational value is in the sympathy it fosters between the teacher and child. When you move about from one to another, and work elbow to elbow with your pupil, he will be apt to tell you his difficulties far more readily than when the whole class has to listen to his confidence. Then, too, he is susceptible to the flattering personal interest such close contact assures; he is spurred to do his best, for he knows that he himself will determine his progress—that he will march in single file, not with twenty-five or thirty abreast.

It may be said in objection, as one mentally reviews this single-file procession and notes the stragglers at the end: "Will not the work of such a class lack unity if the individuals that compose it are not kept together?" By no means—for all are working in the same line of thought, if not in the same place. Then, too, there will be checks and balances in the oral recitation that will prevent the pupil from too complete isolation. The knowledge that you obtain of your pupil's individuality by the close contact of "laboratory" day should be utilized every time you meet them—whatever be the form the recitation assumes.

That individual instruction is practicable must, I think, be conceded. It has, however, a more vital *raison d'être* than mere expediency. If we probe deeper than its every-day feasibility, we shall find this recognition of and appeal to different mental types to be pedagogically sound, because of its close correlation to the elective system of our high schools. The elective system recognizes different mental types in providing several groups of subjects; individual instruction takes note of varied intellectual tendencies in the pursuit of any one subject. Sufficient recognition, one may say, is given to the individuality of the pupil by our several courses of study. The scientific-minded boy—the one who cares for facts—has a scientific course offered him; the literary-minded student has the classic; the practical-minded—he who cares for affairs—has the

business. This is all very true, but what is one to do with these variously minded individuals, when the exigencies of school organization demand that all of them come together in the same class? For example, take the subject of English, a non-elective study in the majority of high schools. To demand the same requirements of every pupil in such a class would be inconsistent, if one admits the efficacy of the group system. Should we not get in mental accord with our pupils more quickly, see the fruit of our instruction ripen with less expenditure of effort, if, instead of narrowing our teaching to appeal only to one type of mind, we should extend and differentiate it to include all types. To exact that everyone master the same essentials is to limit our teaching power to a few; to render these requirements flexible according to the need and power of every pupil is to widen our influence to the farthest possible extent.

We have shown, we believe conclusively, that the scope of individual instruction is much broader than that of class teaching. Its chief strength, however, is in another quality—and that economy. For, is there anyone who, surveying his own educational career in retrospect, does not deplore much of its futility? Could we have been but our own teachers! Or could they who taught us have noted more closely our own peculiar type of mind, what untold benefit might have accrued to both. Progressive education is simply the effort to lessen for each succeeding generation the area of the waste places in the educational field.

In this respect, we have much to be thankful for. We no longer hold as did our ancestors that all truth and mental development is locked in the classics. The educational day that associated mental hardship with intellectual profit was a long one; it lasted several centuries. Fortunately for the cause of enlightenment it is past. Yet, how often do we meet a teacher, who in his inflexible standard of requirements, in his determination to move on all his pupils together at the same pace, and in his insistence on adapting his teaching to the average child, seems in these characteristics to belong to that somber yesterday.

That the educational world of today regards individual instruction as one of its most vital issues is attested in many ways: the quantity of literature on the subject as well as the action of one of our

universities in returning to the preceptorial system, which in itself is the recognition of the individual as an entity in teaching rather than the class.

To sum it all up in a final word, individual method of teaching bases its claim for intelligent consideration on three things: first, its every-day feasibility; second, its pedagogic economy; and lastly, its close correlation to the elective system, the value of which has been tested and proved by time.

The recognition of the pupil's individuality as a factor in his own advancement is of inestimable value to him; it arouses his enthusiasm, awakens belief in his own ability, and develops that power of initiative so vital to success in any sort of life, the lack of which, alas! is the high price so often paid for knowledge learned in schools.